

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

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Mayong,¹ also known as Mayang is an erstwhile kingdom² which is at present situated in Morigaon³ district in Assam. Located within latitudes 26°15'N-26°50'N and longitudes 92° E- 92°50' E, Morigaon was notified as a separate district in 1989 CE till which time it was part of Nagaon district.⁴ It is bounded by Brahmaputra river in the north, Karbi Anglong district in the south, Nagaon district in the east, and Kamrup Metropolitan district in the west. This fertile region of the Brahmaputra valley is also constituted of several rivers, rivulets and marshy lands. The three rivers, viz; Killing, Kapili, and Kalong flow in the southern direction of Morigaon.⁵ Morigaon district bears a rich bio-diversity and

¹ Mayong is also spelt as Mayang. The *Census of India: 2011* uses the spelling Mayong and the same is used in this research work. See Appendix-II.

² Studies on tribal polity and state formation in Northeast India remain a largely unexplored field of historical enquiry. In Mayong, the centre of political power was the *raja* and legitimisation of his position was sought by claiming descent from Bhima and Ghatotkacha of the *Mahabharata* tradition. The *Mayong Vamsawali* records the royal genealogy of Mayong. Commenting on state formation processes, Caneiro states that the difference between a 'paramount chiefdom' and a 'petty kingdom' is not clearly distinct. See Robert L. Caneiro, "The Chiefdom: Precursor of the State", in E.D. Jones and R.R. Kautz (eds.), *The Transition to Statehood in the New World*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1981, pp. 5, 45-47. Some useful works in understanding political formations in Assam include: Hermann Kulke, "Early State Formation and Royal Legitimation in Tribal Areas of Eastern India," in Moser R.R. and M.K. Gautam (eds.), *Aspects of Tribal Life in South Asia*, Vol. 1, University of Bern, Bern, 1978; J.B. Bhattacharjee "Technology and State Formations in Precolonial Northeast India," *Journal of the Asiatic Society*, Vol. LX, No. 1, April, The Asiatic Society, Kolkata, 2018; Rup Kumar Barman, "State formation, Legitimization and Cultural Change: A Study of Koch Kingdom," *The NEHU Journal*, Vol. XII, January-June, North Eastern Hill University, Shillong, 2014. For the purpose of this study, Mayong polity will be understood in the sense of a petty kingdom which existed in the vicinity of the larger kingdom of the Ahoms in medieval Assam.

³ Morigaon district comprises of 1 Mahakuma, 5 Revenue Circles, 7 Development Blocks, 85 Panchayats, and 632 Villages. <http://morigaon.nic.in/district-profile/location-area.html>; Accessed on 09/01/2018.

⁴ Vide Govt. notification No. GAG (B) 370/87/102 dated. 29-09-1989; <http://morigaon.nic.in/district-profile/historical-background.html>; Accessed on 09/01/2018.

⁵ The geographical area of Morigaon district is 1551 sq. kms (10, 83, 165 *bighas* and 13 *lessas*).

has three reserve forests, and the Pobitora⁶ wildlife sanctuary which is constituted of two blocks *viz*; plains and hills. However, the people settled along the banks of the Brahmaputra river face recurring problems of flood and erosion which has implications for history of migration and demography of Mayong.

The early history of Morigaon is closely linked with that of Nagaon during the period of the Pragjyotisa and Kamarupa kingdoms, being ruled by various dynasties such as the Varmans, Salastambhas, and Palas.⁷ The decline of the Kamarupa kingdom in the 12th century CE led to emergence of kingdoms such as the Chutiya, Dimasa, and Kamata. The advent of the Ahoms in the 13th century CE and their rule of Assam for about six hundred years (1228-1826 CE) were to assimilate and integrate many ethnic groups who were allowed to rule as vassal kings in their domains while accepting the Ahom sovereignty. During this period of Assam history, there were about twenty kings known as the *Puwali Rajas*⁸ who ruled in the petty kingdoms situated within the geographical area of Morigaon.⁹ Thus, prior to the advent of the British to the Brahmaputra valley in the 19th century CE, central Assam was ruled by many kings and each of the

⁶ Lalit Hazarika, “*Pobitora*,” *Souvenir Pobitora*, 60th Session, Assam Sahitya Sabha, Morigaon, 1994, pp. 17-19; S.K. Seal Sarma and Pankaj Sharma (reviewed and compiled), *The Management Plan of Pobitora Wildlife Sanctuary: 2011-12 to 2015-16*, Guwahati Wildlife Division, Guwahati, Assam, 2011, pp. 5-8. Named after the daughter of King Suinat Singha of Mayong kingdom, the sanctuary of the one-horned rhino has been host to the Mayong-Pobitora festival, a celebration of the fusion of traditional magic practices and wildlife.

⁷ In epigraphic records, Kamarupa was first mentioned in the Allahabad Pillar Inscription of Samudragupta of about 350 CE. Its earliest name is Pragjyotisa, by which name it is referred to in the two epics the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, as also the principle *Puranas*. Assam acquired its name in the 13th century CE when the Ahoms, belonging to the Tai group of people having migrated from Southern China, crossed the Patkai range and settled in the Brahmaputra valley

⁸ Thapar suggests that use of the concept of *raja* as king is appropriate when the chief who is primarily a military leader is anointed a status of divinity by the priest. Romila Thapar, *Early India: From the Origins to AD. 1300*, University of California Press, California, 2004, p. 110.

⁹ The Puwali rajas are particularly remembered in history for the supply of soldiers to King Rudra Singha (1696-1714 CE) in his objective of expansion of the Ahom kingdom. *Census of India: 2011: Assam, Part-XIIA, Series 19, District Census Handbook, Morigaon; Village and Town Directory*, Directorate of Census Operations, Assam, 2011, p. xv.

kingdoms existed as a political unit with its own administrative system. The modern history of Assam was to witness Nagaon and Morigaon districts being ceded to the East India Company with the signing of The Treaty of Yandaboo (1826 CE). In 1833 CE the British created four districts, viz; Darrang, Goalpara, Kamrup, and Nagaon (Khargharijan). The ruler of the Mayong kingdom, Narayan Singha, was appointed as Mauzadar by the British administrator H.C. Bailey and assigned the duty of collecting taxes in the newly constituted Mayong Mauza which was formed by integrating the petty kingdoms of Ghagua, Jagichawki, Kacharigaya, Kumoi, and Mayong.¹⁰ However, due to the unwillingness of the ruler of Mayong to render this service, the *Mauza* was subsequently transferred to Kalisingha Dekaraja of the Baghara kingdom.

The political and administrative history of Mayong underwent various changes at different periods in history and at present, there is a Revenue Circle, Development Block and Gaon Panchayat by the same name. The Mayong Revenue Circle which was bifurcated from the Morigaon Revenue Circle in 1981 CE comprises of one hundred and seventy-seven revenue villages constituted by five *mauzas* viz; Mayong Mauza, Manaha Mauza, Pakaria Mauza, Niz Ghagua Mauza, and Gova Mauza.¹¹ The Mayong Development Block was constituted in 1956 CE and there are twenty-seven Gaon Panchayats within the Development Block. The Mayong Gaon Panchayat consists of nineteen villages with a total population of 12,044 individuals [*Census of India: 2011*], which is administered

¹⁰ Ribu Deka and Umakanta Dekaraja, *Assam Sahitya Sabhar Jagibhakatgaon Sakhar Antargata Gaon Samuhar Namar Etibrittya*, cited in *Jagi Bhakatgaon Ancholor Lokasanskriti*, *Jagi Bhakatgaon Sakha Sahitya Sabha*, Morigaon, 2007, p. 14.

¹¹ The numbers of revenue villages in the five mauzas are: Mayong Mauza (31 revenue villages), Pakaria Mauza (39 revenue villages), Manaha Mauza (31 revenue villages), Niz Ghagua Mauza (35 revenue villages) and Gova Mauza (41 revenue villages). Information collected from the Revenue Circle Office, Mayong, Morigaon, Assam, 2016.

within the larger Mayong Revenue Circle and Mayong Development Block. In the post-colonial period of Assam history, the Mayong Development Block and Mayong Revenue Circle were formed with a larger jurisdiction area covering villages which were once under the domain of other petty kingdoms of central Assam such as the Gobha, Baghara, Ghagua, Kumoi, Tetelia, Tarani Kalbari and Nelli etc. It may be noted that the erstwhile Mayong kingdom corresponds roughly to the present Mayong Gaon Panchayat which is also the universe of study for this research. The history and culture of the villages located within the Mayong Development Block and Mayong Revenue Circle are also examined to understand the subject from a wider perspective.

The geographical area that once existed as the kingdom of Mayong is at present inhabited by different ethnic communities such as the Kacharis,¹² Karbis, Kalitas, Keots, Koches, and Naths or Yogis etc. It may be noted that both literary and archaeological sources do not provide a clear picture about the earliest settlers of Mayong. In this context, Dhanya Ram Roy observed, "...it is not known who were the aborigines of this land or which ruling dynasty had ruled there before Soinatva Singha or who were the authors of the civilization there. Neither the *Mayong Rajvamsawali* nor the *Assam Buranjis* can provide us any clue to these questions."¹³ There are different perspectives regarding the identity of the original inhabitants of Mayong. Lokendra Hazarika¹⁴ suggests that the earliest settlers of the area were the ethnic tribes such as Bodos, Kacharis, Karbis, and

¹² Kachari refers to a number of ethnic groups inhabiting predominantly in Assam who speak Tibeto-Burman group of languages and claim common ancestry. They are believed to have been the earliest settlers in Assam.

¹³ Dhanya Ram Roy, *A History of Mayong*, Olympia Publication, Guwahati, 2017, (First Edition), p. 63. The *vamsawali* or genealogy of the kings of Mayong kingdom has been maintained till date and is at present in the custody of the titular king Tarani Kanta Singha.

¹⁴ Lokendra Hazarika, *Mayangar Itihas*, Rodali Prakashan, Morigaon, 2011, p. 5.

Tiwas. According to his observation the Kachari population was the largest in number and occupied the most dominant position among the various groups.¹⁵ Jatindra Kumar Borgohain¹⁶ informs that the earthen pots belonging to the Neolithic age which was found in Mayong indicate the early human settlements in this place. Moreover, the abundance of broken earthen utensils with floral designs and terracotta images in the area also suggests artisanal activities and that the people had knowledge of arts and crafts. These professional artisans have been identified as Hiras, and they are said to have settled in the highlands.¹⁷ Gakul Deka¹⁸ informed that the inhabitants of Burhamayong claim that the early human settlements in the region were associated with their village. Another village connected to this early settlement is Bargaon, meaning a ‘large village’, which is situated near Mayong hill. Local scholars such as Jadab Chandra Teran¹⁹ opines that the first people to arrive and occupy Mayong were the Karbis, and later many other communities migrated and settled in the place. For Anandaram Saikia,²⁰ the ancestors of the people living in the western portion of the area can be traced to the history of Darrang district of Assam. It is important to note that since 1969 CE, there are 135 villages which have been erased from the map of Morigaon district due to the impact of floods and erosion of the Brahmaputra river. It is possible to assume that the displaced people from these villages must have searched for new settlements. The demographic pattern of Mayong which is

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Jatindra Kumar Borgohain, *Asamar Sanskritik Itihas*, Vol. I, Assam Sahitya Sabha, Jorhat, 2013, (Second Edition), p. 218.

¹⁷ Lokendra Hazarika, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

¹⁸ Personal interview with Gakul Deka, 58 yrs, Farmer, Burhamayong on 11/01/2018.

¹⁹ Personal interview with Jadab Chandra Teran, 73 yrs, Farmer, Burhamayong on 11/01/2018. He is recognised as the Karbi *Bangthe* (chief) by the Karbi population living in the village.

²⁰ Personal interview with Anandaram Saikia, 60 yrs, Retired Government Employee, Hatibagara on 10/01/2018.

a multi-cultural society is to be understood against this movement and re-location of the people in and around Morigaon district.

It will be worthwhile to examine some of the perspectives put forward regarding the origin of the Mayong kingdom. The repository of myths and legends belong to the cultural history of a community and plays a role in shaping their identity. There is a popular folk tradition which claims that the ancestors of the ruling dynasty of Mayong kingdom migrated from Maibong, the erstwhile capital of the Kachari kingdom.²¹ This oral narrative traces the origin of the Mayong kingdom to a Dimasa Kachari prince named Suinat Singha, who is said to have left his birth place due to some family feud and arrived at Mayong. The tradition maintains that on reaching Mayong, the prince settled there, whereupon the inhabitants acknowledged him as their king due to his extraordinary qualities. It may be mentioned that during the medieval period of Assam history, the Dimasa Kachari kingdom was also known as Hedamba Rajya and the territorial domains included the North Cachar Hills, Cachar plains and some areas of Nagaon district in the Brahmaputra valley.²² It is believed that some Kacharis left Kamarupa kingdom due to political turmoil and crossed the Brahmaputra river; hence they came to be known by the name Dimasa, meaning ‘sons of the river’. At Maibong, the Dimasa Kachari kings were influenced by Brahmanical ideology and by the beginning of the 18th century CE, the Brahmanas began to extend considerable influence in the royal court. While commenting on the culture of the Dimasa Kacharis, H.K. Barpujari²³ observed that the earliest literature published

²¹ The Dimasas were the ruling tribe of the Kachari kingdom; and were also known as Dimasa Kacharis. The people belonged to the Bodo ethnic community and spoke the Tibeto-Burman group of languages. Lokendra Hazarika, *op.cit.*, p. 7.

²² H.K. Barpujari (ed.), *TCHA*, Vol.-III, p. 291.

²³ *Ibid.*

was the book titled, *Haidamba Bhasa Pravaesh* authored by Manicharan Barman and it was written in Bengali language in 1927 CE.

The *Mayong Vamsawali* or genealogy of the kings of Mayong, records that Suinat Singha (1538 –1546 CE) was the first ruler of the Mayong kingdom. Lokendra Hazarika²⁴ opines that legends claim that there was a ruler in Mayong even before the advent of Suinat Singha to the region. Another version regarding the origin of the kingdom traces the history to a Maibong clan of Moirang, a place by the same name having existed as a principality in Manipur. The Moirangs are said to have migrated and settled in Mayong and later also established a kingdom.²⁵ As a place of historical importance, Mayong is mentioned in the *Buranjis*.²⁶ It records that the Ahoms constructed a military camp at Kajali Chawki on account of its strategic location. This place has been identified with Pachim Mayong or the western part of Mayong. It was during the reign of Jayadhvaj Singha (1648-1663 CE) that the Ahom soldiers are said to have sailed to Kajali after the loss of Saraighat and Pandu forts confronting Mir Jumla's invasion in 1662 CE. S.L. Baruah²⁷ observed that during the rule of the Ahom king Suhungmung, the kingdom became very powerful and it expanded to include a vast geographical area extending up to Kajalimukh. Further, setting up

²⁴ Lokendra Hazarika, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

²⁵ G.C. Nanda, "Mayong: The Heritage of Black Magic and Traditional Treatment," *International Journal of Research in Ayurveda and Pharmacology*, 5(2), March-April, 2014, p. 235; <http://dx.doi.org/10.7987/2277-4343.05437>; Accessed on 21/12/18.

²⁶ The *buranjis* are chronicles written on oblong strips of bark; initially written in Tai-Ahom language and later in Assamese. The *Buranji* writing tradition was introduced to Assam in the 13th century CE with the coming of the Ahoms even though manuscript writing tradition was already known. It was not until the 18th century CE that the term *Buranji* came to be used to refer to the Assamese chronicles although all the Ahom chronicles are now referred to as *Buranjis*. The earlier terms for the texts were *Akhyans*, *Kathas*, *Charitas* or *Vamsavalis*. S.K. Bhuyan (tr. and ed.), *Tungkhungia Buranji or History of Assam, 1681-1826*, Assam Publication Board, Guwahati, 1990 (Reprint).

²⁷ S.L. Baruah, *The Comprehensive History of Assam*, Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi, 2005, pp. 233-234.

of a military base at Kajalimukh by Pratap Singha was a significant political development in Assam history which probably brought the kingdom of Mayong in contact with the Ahoms.

The changing political circumstances as a result of the decline of Kamarupa kingdom found the Hedamba (Kachari) kings extending their territorial domains up to Gobha and Mayong by the 11th century CE. It may be mentioned that the area was later subjugated and controlled by the Ahoms. Kanaklal Baruah states as thus:²⁸

“...the Kamrupa kings absorbed the Kapili valley within their kingdom. The copper plate inscription of Harjaravarman has been found at Hayunthal within the Kapili valley, indicating that in the ninth century AD this area was within the Kamrupa kingdom. When the power of the Kamrupa kings dwindled after the eleventh century, the Hedamba (Kachari) kings extended dominions, in the south bank of the Brahmaputra, as far as the Dikhan River on the east and as far as Mayong and Gobha towards the west.”

The petty kingdoms which existed in the western part of Nagaon were known as Nagaya Raja Puwali and the kings came to be referred to as Saturaja. They often supplied soldiers to the Ahoms during war times and thus the small *rajās* maintained political relations with the Ahoms in medieval Assam. Regarding the importance of the kingdom in central Assam, Sarat Kumar Phukan²⁹ observed as thus: “Mayong was one of the seven small tribal states

²⁸ Kanaklal Barua, *Studies in Early History of Assam*, Assam Sahitya Sabha, Gauhati, 1973, pp. 106-107; cited in Jibakanta Nath, *Mayangia Upabhasa*, Saswata Prakashan, Morigaon, 2013, p. 7.

²⁹ Sarat Kumar Phukan, *Genesis of Ancient Toponymy of Central and Lower Assam*, Publication Board Assam, Guwahati, 2012, (First Edition), p. 510.

under the Ahoms within the district of Jagi Chaki. Here, a descendent of Sankardeva established a *Satra* in AD 1642.”

It is noteworthy that Mayong had an independent identity and was never a member of this group of seven kingdoms or Saturajas. Further, discussing about the vassal kingdoms under the Ahoms, Hatem Ali³⁰ categorised them into four groups of kingdoms, viz; ‘Dantiporia kingdoms, Satorajia kingdoms, Pancharajia kingdoms and Ahomporia kingdoms’. Here, the scholar placed the kingdom of Mayong under the group of Ahomporia kingdoms. Regarding the importance of these vassal kingdoms, he observed that, “The history of medieval Assam without the history of these kingdoms is certainly bound to be an insular history of a particular people, tribe or society.”³¹ In an attempt to understand the extent of the kingdom of Mayong, Sarat Kumar Phukan citing J.P. Wade in his work titled, *An Account of Assam* mentioned as thus: “Mayong was on the east of Kajali, under the government of lesser *raja*, separated to the southward from the Kalang by range of hills, the Brahmaputra and the Booraboori Hills formed its northern boundary.”³² Further, it was stated that the territorial area under the present Mayong Revenue Circle was part of the Swarnapitha, Kadali and Kapili kingdoms.³³ That Mayong was situated on the western side of Morigaon district and existed as an independent kingdom is also suggested by Birinchidhar Burhagohain³⁴ in his article titled, *Morigaon Jilar Purani Buranji*.

³⁰ Hatem Ali, *A Study of the History of the Vassal Kingdoms under the Ahoms*, (Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis), Department of History, Gauhati University, Guwahati, 2003. p. 7.

³¹ *Ibid.* p. 1.

³² Sarat Kumar Phukan, *op. cit.*, p. 510.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Birinchidhar Burhagohain, “*Morigaon Jilar Purani Buranji*”, in Nabakanta Bardaloi (ed.), *Pabitara-A Souvenir*, 60th Session of Assam Sahitya Sabha, Marigaon, Assam, February, 1994, pp. 165-169.

In traditional societies such as that of the Mayongs, religion is intricately connected with all aspects of life and culture. Religious symbols and ritual practices are often integrated with material and artistic culture of the society such as music, dance, story-telling and literature. Magic and superstitions are central to the religious beliefs and culture of the society; and magic spells were taught by a *Kabiraj* (folk healer) as a tradition to the interested individuals at a particular age. The practitioners use *mantras* are believed to have psychological and spiritual power. Jan Gonda³⁵ defines a *mantra* as thus: "...a general name for the formulas, verses or sequences of words in prose which contain praise..., are believed to have magical, religious, or spiritual efficiency, are recited, muttered or sung in the Vedic ritual and which are collected in the methodically arranged corpora of Vedic texts." *Mantras* are passed on from one preceptor to one disciple in the course of a prescribed initiation.³⁶ The *mantras* which are not available in written form but preserved in the memory of the practitioners have become a rich source of folklore for Mayong history and culture. It is important to note that all *mantras* are not intelligible, or having literary value, but their importance and purpose is known to the folk healer. It may be mentioned that *mantras* have also been a part of the culture in other parts of India. An example is the reference in the *Rajatarangini* by Kalhana. The text informs that *mantras* were used by common people for specific rituals, and that the paddy fields in Kashmir were protected from the Nagas by the guards who performed their duties by the practice of *mantras*.³⁷

³⁵ Jan Gonda, *The Indian Mantra*, p. 251, cited in Harvey P. Alper (ed.), *Understanding Mantras*, Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Pvt. Ltd., Delhi, 2012, p. 4.

³⁶ Agehananda Bharati, *The Tantric Tradition*, Rider and Company, London, 1965, p. 111.

³⁷ Harvey P. Alper (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 2.

The folk healers known as *Bez*, *Bezni* and *Kabiraj* are popular in Mayong and their expertise is sought to protect the people from various ills affecting individuals and families.³⁸ The presence of female folk healers (*Bezni*) and the possibility of any member of the society becoming a practitioner regardless of community or class indicate that Mayong society existed as a conglomeration of various ethnic communities. The practitioners use *mantras* mostly in combination with local herbal medicines to ward off an ‘evil eye’ or cure certain diseases. Some of the *mantras* which are used in the practice of healing illnesses include *Sapardharani Mantra*, *Karati Mantra*, *Sarvadhak Mantra*, *Kamaratna Mantra*, *Bhutar Mantra*, and *Khetra Mantra*.³⁹ The subject-matter of the *mantras* include healing formulas, black magic, and sorcery. The *Luki Mantra*, for example, is used for disappearance of an object from human sight, while the *Murarabikhar Mantra* is used for curing headache. The *Bhut Bakhikaran Mantra* can be used to tame or control ghosts and evil spirits. Therefore, the chants and magical spells are considered sacred and instill a sense of awe and fear among the people. Individuals interested to learn and practice the *mantras* are expected to be sincere and importantly have belief in the craft. It may be mentioned that Kamarupa as such was known as a land of magic and witchcraft and Mayong seems to have been the nerve-centre of such practices. The folk healer is also a specialist who possesses the expertise to treat individuals suffering from mental ailments. In some cases *mantra* practitioners also play a role in protecting the agricultural fields from any untoward incident, to ensure abundant harvest. In a society where

³⁸ Personal interview with Prabin Saikia, 65 yrs, *Bez* and Farmer, Ouguri on 24/06/2015. According to him folk healing is not considered as a distinct profession since the practitioners cannot earn a living out of it. Majority of them are engaged in agricultural activities while they continue to practice as folk healers.

³⁹ H.K. Barpujari (ed.), *TCHA*, Vol. - III, Publication Board Assam, Guwahati, 2007, (Third Edition), p. 308.

agricultural economy is the lifeline of the people, the *Bez* is also consulted for such measures as protecting crops and fields. The practice of traditional knowledge in solving varied problems of the lives of the people ensured that the tradition was kept alive through the practitioners without whom it could not function.

The *mantraputhis*⁴⁰ are book of *mantras*, and the manuscripts that have been discovered so far have been preserved in the Mayong Village Museum and Research Centre at Rajamayong. At present there are more than forty manuscripts although it is believed that there are many more which are in the custody of individuals residing in the different villages of Mayong. The manuscripts were originally written on the bark of the *sanchi* (*aquillaria agallocha*) tree although some of them came to be written on paper in later times. It is possible that the manuscripts written on paper may be the copies of the original *mantraputhis*. The scripts used in the manuscripts are Kaithili (old Assamese) and modern Assamese. And the language indicates that the documents may belong to the medieval period in Assam history. A large number of *mantraputhis* have undergone preventive treatment under the aegis of the Srimanta Sankardeva Kalakshetra, Panjabari, Assam and the National Mission for Manuscripts, New Delhi. A very important aspect of Mayong history and culture is that the *mantraputhis* and *vamsawali* discovered till date were found mostly within the jurisdiction of the Mayong Gaon Panchayat which is also the territorial area of the erstwhile kingdom. Thus, the significance of Mayong as a centre of magic and sorcery is well established.

⁴⁰ See Appendix III; *Mantraputhis*: A, Preserved in Mayong Village Museum and Research Centre, Rajamayong; and, B: *Mantraputhis* and Individual Custodians.

The subject-matter of the *mantraputhis* is varied relating to instructions on methods of treatment for problems of both physical and mental nature. No treatment is complete without the chanting of a specific *mantra* and prescription of an indigenous herbal mixture which the patient has to consume as medicine. Although there are manuscripts to guide the practice of black magic, it is not common in present times. The most common *mantra* which is still popular in Mayong is that related to snake-bite which is mentioned in many of the *Mantraputhis*. Although majority of the illness and the corresponding treatment methods are mentioned specifically, there are also diseases of unknown nature which the *Bez* has to identify by performing rituals and thereafter provide the panacea. The *mantras* invoke the names of Brahmanical gods and goddesses, which indicate that the Brahmanical faith was familiar to the people of Mayong. It must be admitted that the manuscript does not mention the year and authorship details and majority of the texts available are not found in a complete form. Yet, the significance of the source lies in that there are inferences that can be drawn on various aspects of Mayong history such as religious beliefs, rituals and ritual specialists, traditional knowledge of medicinal plants and ecology, and many other aspects connected to the cultural history of Mayong.

Early Assam witnessed the coming of the Puranic Hindu faith.⁴¹ The Brahmanas came to settle in this region as early as the 6th century CE which is revealed by the Barganga Rock Inscription of king Bhutivarman.⁴² The rulers of early Assam claimed themselves to be upholders of the Brahmanical principle of

⁴¹ Rena Laisram, *The History of the Religion of Ancient Assam Based on Archaeological Evidence*, (Unpublished M.Phil Dissertation), Centre for Historical Studies, JNU, New Delhi, 1990, p. 130.

⁴² N.K. Bhattasali, 'The Barganga Rock Inscription of Maharajadhiraja Bhutivarman,' *Journal of the Assam Research Society*, Vol.8, No. 4, October, Kamarupa Anusandhana Samiti, Gauhati, 1941, pp. 138-139.

varnasramadharmā (Four Orders and Stages of Life according to the *Vedas*). The reason for migration of the Brahmanas to Assam could be the inducement offered to them by way of land grants or *agraharas*. During the reign of King Mahabhutivarman in the 6th century CE, many Brahmanas came to settle in Kamarupa since extensive grants of land were given to them. The Brahmanas in turn officiated as priests for the king and the kingdom and performed the Asvamedha sacrifice or assisted the king in general educational and cultural aspects; The spread of Brahmanical religion is revealed by the increasing number of *yajnas* or sacrificial rituals which were performed by the rulers, under the guidance of the priests. The priests came from a far a place as Kathiawar of Gujarat and they were known as Nagar Brahmanas. Scholars suggests that the fall of the imperial Guptas, coinciding with the influence of Kamarupa over the entire North Eastern region in the later part of the 5th century CE, caused the migration of a large number of Brahmanas. The patronage which the kings of Assam extended to learned individuals and religious teachers was the main factor which attracted a large number of learned men into the country. The priests played a crucial role in the legitimisation of the ruling family through the narrative of divine origin influenced by Brahmanical ideology. Thus, the genealogy of the kings recorded in *Mayong Vamsawali* claim that the Mayong kings were descendents of the Ghatotkacha, the son of Pandava Bhima.⁴³ The tradition states that Ghatotkacha is believed to have ruled at Hidimbapur (present Dimapur) which had its capital at a place called Maibong. The ancestry of Suinat Singha as

⁴³ Lokendra Hazarika, “*Etiyakhe Garakha Mayaangor Otit aru Bortoman*”, in Utpal Nath (ed.), Souvenir *Kalshila*, 12th Biennial Conference of Morigaon Jila Sahitya Sabha, Mayong, Morigaon, December, 2010, p. 15. In the *Mahabharata* epic, the character of Ghatotkacha is depicted as possessing magical powers and as the most powerful warrior of the Kurukshetra war which was fought between the Pandavas and the Kauravas.

the first ruler of Mayong kingdom was incorporated with the *Mahabharata* tradition. The legitimation of the rule through this divine origin of the *Mahabharata* narrative finds similarity with that of the Dimasas.⁴⁴

Assam in its formative period witnessed the prevalence of a number of religions such as Saivism, Saktism, Vaisnavism, as also Buddhism. There also existed simultaneously many other minor deities which were worshipped, among whom Surya and Ganesa are particularly prominent.⁴⁵ Tantricism⁴⁶ influenced various religious sects in Assam, especially Buddhism, Saivism and Saktism. That Tantricism had a base in ancient Assam is accepted by many scholars which is exemplified by the sword believed to have been used for human sacrifices and recovered from Hatimura Temple at Nowgong.⁴⁷ The Mayong Village Museum and Research Centre has also preserved some artefacts like sharp weapons and swords which are believed to have been used for human sacrifice (*narabali*) in the remote past. There are sites of religious importance in Mayong such as Chanaka and Kachashila which reveal that Tantric rites were practiced in the erstwhile kingdom.⁴⁸ Mayong has many historical sites of importance and some of them have been notified by The Directorate of Archaeology, Assam as State Protected Archaeological Sites under *The Assam Ancient Monuments and*

⁴⁴ J.B. Bhattacharjee, *Cachar under British Rule in Northeast India*, Radiant Publishers, New Delhi, 1977, pp. 9-11. Jasanarayan, the ruler of the Dimasas defeated the Ahoms in the 17th century CE and claimed that he was the son of Ghatotkacha, the son of Bhima and Hiramba. He issued a silver coin, renamed the kingdom as Heramba kingdom and assumed the title of Herambeswaraor 'lord of Heramba'.

⁴⁵ B.K. Kakati, *The Mother Goddess Kamakhya*, Lawyer's Book Stall, Gauhati, 1948, p. 132.

⁴⁶ Tantricism is a mystic esoteric system and one of the sub-traditions of Saktism, which refers to techniques, practices and ritual of worshipping the male and female principles, *lingam-yoni* or Shiva-Shakti involving sacred diagrams (*yantra, mandala*), gestures (*mudra*), repetition of sound formulas (*mantras*), meditation and *yogic* exercises in order to achieve spiritual liberation (*siddhi*). See Hugh B. Urban, *Tantra: Sex, Secrecy, Politics, and Power in the Study of Religion*, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 2007, pp. 46-47.

⁴⁷ K.L. Barua, "The Hatimura Temple at Nowgong", *Journal of the Assam Research Society*, Vol. 2, No. 1, Kamarupa Anusandhana Samiti, Gauhati, 1934, p. 12.

⁴⁸ See Appendix VII: B.

Records Act, 1959. There are still some other sites which are yet to be declared as protected under the Directorate of Archaeology, Assam. A significant archaeological find is the Burhamayong Rock Inscription which is protected under the Directorate of Archaeology, Assam; the inscription is yet to be deciphered in a complete manner.⁴⁹ H.N. Dutta,⁵⁰ the former Director of the Directorate of Archaeology, Assam has given some information and observed that the inscription is engraved in Assamese language and opens with an invocation to ‘*sri saivya*’ which indicates that the record is related to Siva worship. Regarding the dating of the inscription, Dutta opines that it belongs to medieval period of Assam history, and gives the year as 1700 CE. It may be mentioned that the Burhamayong inscription is a group of inscriptions which consist of six lines on the left, fifteen lines in the middle and five lines on the right. It is placed horizontally and appears to contain three inscriptions in the series. The complete inscription measures 395 cms. in length and 112 cms. in breadth; and each of the inscriptions measure 85 cms. x 47 cms., 40 cms. x 112 cms., and 270 cms. x 30 cms. respectively.⁵¹ The Burhamayong site where the inscription is at present located is on the side of the Mayong hill. Dutta claims that it was in fact located on an ancient course of a river. However, this inference cannot be verified at present as there is not enough evidence available to substantiate it.

Mayong is perhaps best known as the ‘land of black magic and witchcraft’.

In fact, mainly due to association of Mayong with magic, Assam came to be

⁴⁹ The site where Burhamayong Rock Inscription was discovered covers an area of 1*biga* and 2 *kathas*, the year of listing is 1994 CE.

⁵⁰ H.N. Dutta, *A Guide Book on Archaeological Sites and Monuments Listed by Directorate of Archaeology, Assam*, Government of Assam, The Directorate of Archaeology Assam, Guwahati, 2010, p. 35.

⁵¹ The information is displayed at the site, Burhamayong Village, Mayong, Morigaon, Assam.

known to the outside world as a land of sorcerers. It is said that even invaders to Assam brought with them religious preceptors to resist the evil impact of the black magic of sorcerers.⁵² An example is that of the military expedition that took place during the reign of the Mughal emperor, Aurangzeb (1658-1707 CE). Raja Ram Singh of Amber had initiated an expedition against the Ahoms and in this mission, the king brought with him Tegh Bahadur, the ninth Guru of the Sikhs to assist them in preventing the evil impact of black magic which was supposed to have been practiced by the sorcerers of Assam.⁵³ It is said that he also brought with him five other Muslim saints with the same objective of protecting themselves from the evil spirits and impending danger.⁵⁴

An analysis of culture requires understanding of the historical context since the continuity of culture is generally related to traditions. Traditions are an inheritance, it ceases to exist when no longer critical to society practicing them. Yet, a tradition, approximated as common to several societies or the people, is *imaginary* and can very well be called an invention⁵⁵ since it is the making of a consolidated vision about one's heritage, an emotive attempt of fabrication around the images of the past. The people at a crucial juncture construct their tradition from the fragments of history and believe it as a grand discovery of 'truth' about them. To reconstruct the history and culture of Mayong, it is pertinent to focus on the erstwhile Mayong kingdom which corresponds roughly to the present Mayong Gaon Panchayat in Morigaon district. Further, it is crucial

⁵² H.K. Barpujari (ed.), *TCHA*, Vol. - III, Publication Board Assam, Guwahati, 2007 (Third Edition), p. 242.

⁵³ *Ibid*, pp. 242-243.

⁵⁴ *Ibid*.

⁵⁵ Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (ed.), *The Invention of Tradition*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1992, Introduction.

to examine the political developments and cultural interactions that may have taken place with the neighbouring kingdoms and communities to understand continuity and change in Mayong.

Literature Review:

An overview of the existing and emerging body of knowledge is helpful in identifying gaps in the research so far undertaken on the subject. The literature review is categorized as follows:

I. Secondary Sources: In English

There are some works dealing with a comprehensive history of Assam which helps in understanding the political, socio-economic and cultural aspects of the erstwhile kingdoms such as Mayong, Gobha, Nelli, Baghara etc. in various periods of its history. There are some references in these works related to Mayong which are included as part of the general history of Assam during the ancient, medieval and modern periods. This include Edward Gait's book titled, *A History of Assam*,⁵⁶ K.L. Baruah's book titled, *The Early History of Kamarupa*,⁵⁷ and B.K. Baruah's book titled, *A Cultural History of Assam*.⁵⁸ The work by Dhanya Ram Roy titled, *A History of Mayong*⁵⁹ deals with aspects of Mayong culture but lacks in analysis and in depth study. A valuable work on tantric practices of Mayong is R.M. Nath's work titled, *The Background of Assamese Culture*⁶⁰ which is also a good source for understanding the cultural history of

⁵⁶ Sir Edward Gait, *A History of Assam*, EBH Publishers, Guwahati, 2008, (Fourth Indian Reprint).

⁵⁷ K.L. Baruah, *Early History of Kamarupa*, LBS Publications, Guwahati, 2008, (Reprint).

⁵⁸ B.K. Barua, *A Cultural History of Assam*, Bina Library, Guwahati, 2003, (Fourth Edition).

⁵⁹ Dhanya Ram Roy, *A History of Mayong*, Olympia Publication, Guwahati, 2017.

⁶⁰ R.M. Nath, *The Background of Assamese Culture*, Dutta Baruah and Co., Guwahati, 1978, (Second Edition).

Assam in general. There are books dealing with various aspects of Assam although Mayong finds few references in them. They include *The Comprehensive History of Assam*⁶¹ in five volumes edited by H.K. Barpujari and the *A Comprehensive History of Assam*⁶² by S.L. Baruah. The works discuss Ahom-Mughal relations and give a perspective on the military camp or *Chawki* established at Kajali which reveal the strategic location of the site situated at the confluence of the rivers Brahmaputra and Kalong and on the western boundary of Mayong.

There are some relevant works in the form of unpublished theses and dissertations of the Departments of Assamese, Folklore Research, History, and Political Science submitted in various universities in Northeast India. The researches which have been done specifically on aspects of Mayong history are valuable as sources and have been consulted for the present study. Dilip Kumar Kalita's doctoral thesis titled, *A Study of the Magical Beliefs and Practices in Assam with Special Reference to the Magical Lore of Mayong*⁶³ is an attempt to study the magical beliefs that have been practiced in different parts of Assam. The information on Mayong is particularly useful. Guneswar Deka's doctoral thesis titled, *Socio-Political Changes in Raja-Mayong Village in the District of Morigaon, Assam* is a study on Rajamayong which is also the highest populated village in Mayong.⁶⁴ It deals with the migration of the Mayong king and people to Rajamayong village and aspects of continuity and change in Mayong society.

⁶¹ H.K. Barpujari (ed.), *TCHA*, Vols. I-V, Publication Board Assam, Guwahati, 2004, 2007, 2016 (Reprint).

⁶² S.L. Baruah, *op. cit.*

⁶³ Dilip Kumar Kalita, *A Study of the Magical Beliefs and Practices in Assam with Special Reference to the Magical Lore of Mayong*, (Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis), Department of Folklore Research, Gauhati University, Guwahati, 1992.

⁶⁴ Guneswar Deka, *Socio-Political Changes in Raja-Mayong Village in the District of Morigaon, Assam*, (Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis), Department of Political Science, Gauhati University, Guwahati, 2009.

Hatem Ali's doctoral thesis titled, *A Study of the History of the Vassal Kingdoms under the Ahoms*⁶⁵ is an important contribution to Mayong political and administrative history since it discusses the relations of the smaller kingdoms of central Assam with that of the Ahoms during the medieval period. Utpal Nath's doctoral thesis titled, *Folk Healing Practices and Folk Healers in Mayong: An Appraisal in the Socio-Economic Context*⁶⁶ examines the traditional knowledge and belief systems in Mayong. Although the work is useful in the context of understanding various aspects related to the folk healers and folk practices in Mayong, it is of partial importance to this research since it lacks a historical perspective. The thesis by Bobby Das, titled, *Buddhism in Assam: From the Earliest Times to 13th century AD*⁶⁷ helps in understanding the prevalence of Buddhism and related aspects of Tantricism in Assam.

The unpublished M. Phil. dissertations consulted for the present study include Rena Laisram's dissertation titled, *The History of the Religion of Ancient Assam based on Archaeological Evidence*⁶⁸ which presents a comprehensive study of the religion of early Assam from a historical approach by examining the available archaeological sources. The information relating to the inscriptions and sculptures of Mayong history and culture are particularly useful for this research work. Tirtha Saikia's dissertation titled, *A Study on the Socio-Economic*

⁶⁵ Hatem Ali, *op.cit.*

⁶⁶ Utpal Nath, *Folk Healing Practices and Folk Healers in Mayong: An Appraisal in the Socio-Economic Context*, (Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis), Department of Folklore Research, Gauhati University, Guwahati, 2015.

⁶⁷ Bobby Das, *Buddhism in Assam: From the Earliest Times to 13th century AD*, (Unpublished Ph. D. Thesis), Department of History, North Eastern Hill University, Shillong, 2014.

⁶⁸ Rena Laisram, *The History of the Religion of Ancient Assam based on Archaeological Evidence*, (Unpublished M. Phil Dissertation), Centre for Historical Studies, JNU, New Delhi, 1990.

*Condition on the Koch Population of Mayong, Morigaon, (Assam)*⁶⁹ gives much information about the Koches living in Mayong and is also useful as a source for Mayong society in general. The political and local administrative aspects related to Mayong are dealt with in the dissertation titled, *A Study of the Administrative System of the Mayang Kingdom*⁷⁰ by Paban Kumar Bishaya. Dhanya Ram Roy in his dissertation titled, *A Study of the History of Mayong with Special Reference to the Archaeological Remains in Mayong*⁷¹ is a good source for archaeological remains of Mayong and forms a good base to understand the religious and cultural aspects of Mayong history.

II. Secondary Sources: In Vernacular

The book titled, *Mayangar Itihash*⁷² by Lokendra Hazarika is a work on the political history of Mayong which is based on the genealogy (*vamsawali*) of the ruling family. He attempted to provide in a systematic manner, the list of the kings of Mayong and reconstruct the dynastic history as well as cultural aspects of the erstwhile kingdom. The book also includes illustrations of some of the *mantras* practiced in Mayong. However, the study does not follow a historical research method and the information has to be critically examined for an objective inference. A comparative study with other works can make the information more useful. Kamal Chandra Nath's book titled, *Mayongt Mantra-*

⁶⁹ Tirtha Saikia, *A Study on the Socio- Economic Condition on the Koch Population of Mayong, Morigaon, (Assam)*, (Unpublished M.Phil. Dissertation), Department of Economics, Vinayaka Missions University, Salem, Tamilnadu, 2009.

⁷⁰ Paban Kumar Bishaya, *A Study of the Administrative System of the Mayang Kingdom*, (Unpublished M. Phil. Dissertation), Department of Political Science, Vinayaka Missions University, Salem, Tamilnadu, 2009.

⁷¹ Dhanya Ram Roy, *A Study of the History of Mayong with Special Reference to the Archaeological Remains in Mayong*, (Unpublished M.Phil. Dissertation), Department of History, Vinayaka Missions University, Salem, Tamilnadu, 2009.

⁷² Lokendra Hazarika, *Mayangar Itihas*, Rodali Prakashan, Jagi Bhakatgaon, Morigaon, Assam, 2011.

*Sanskritir Sadhana: Eti Samikha*⁷³ examines the evolution and status of the *mantras* in literature. It deals with the *mantras* practiced in the area with their uses for different purposes which give insights into the cultural traditions and its impact on the Mayong society. *Mayang Anchalar Loka-sanskriti*⁷⁴ by Hemanta Kumar Sarma deals with folk traditions of the area with special reference to Rajamayang and Burhamayang villages as centres of magical belief system. Despite the valuable contributions made to the present works available on Mayong, there is much scope for a critical study of the *mantras* in particular and belief system in general. *Tiwa Sanskritir Ruprekha (Part II)*⁷⁵ by Lokeshwar Gogoi's contributes to the existing knowledge on aspects of history and culture of the erstwhile kingdoms in central Assam such as Gobha, Mayong, and Dimarua etc. Ramesh Chandra Nath in his work titled, *Mayar Rajya Mayongor Kahini*⁷⁶ has recorded the personal experiences of the folk healers and thus serves as an important source for the traditional knowledge and related practices in Mayong. Jayanta Madhab Bora's work titled *Mayong: Jadur Deshor Gopan Gatha*⁷⁷ examines certain aspects of socio - political and cultural issues related to Mayong. In the book titled, *Morigaonloi Ahiba*,⁷⁸ Diganta Kumar Bora explored places of cultural and historic importance in Morigaon district which also includes the sites situated in Mayong. The book *Morigaon Jilar Lokasamskriti*⁷⁹ by Moneswar Deuri is an account of the historical and cultural background of the

⁷³ Kamal Chandra Nath, *Mayongt Mantra-Sanskritir Sadhana: Eti Samikha*, Saidyasnata Prakashan, Charaibahi, Morigaon, Assam, 2009.

⁷⁴ Hemanta Kumar Sarma, *Mayang Anchalar Loka-sanskriti*, Assam Sahitya Sabha, Chandrakanta Handique Bhawan, Jorhat, 1993.

⁷⁵ Lokeshwar Gogoi, *Tiwa Sanskritir Ruprekha (Part II)*, President of Tiwa Mathonlai Tokhra, Silchang, Nagaon, 1987.

⁷⁶ Ramesh Chandra Nath, *Mayar Rajya Mayongor Kahini*, Studio Nath Brothers, Mayong Bazar, Morigaon, 2008.

⁷⁷ Jayanta Madhab Bora, *Mayong: Jadur Deshor Gopan Gatha*, Jyoti Prakashan, Guwahati, 2017.

⁷⁸ Diganta Kumar Bora, *Morigaonloi Ahiba*, Purbayon Publication, Guwahati, 2018.

⁷⁹ Moneswar Deuri, *Morigaon Jilar Lokasamskriti*, Reception Samittee of 60th Asom Sahitya Sabha, Morigaon, 1994.

people living in the Morigaon district based on folklore. The historical background of Mayong forms part of the study.

There are some relevant works in vernacular in the form of unpublished thesis of the Departments of Assamese and Major Indian Languages, Gauhati University which has helped to observe the subject from a wider perspective. Minakshi Tamuli's doctoral thesis titled, *Mayangar Loka Sahitya: Mantra Sahityar Bishesh Adhyaayan*⁸⁰ has attempted to analyse folk literature, folk songs and *mantras* of Mayong which offers a fresh perspective to the subject under discussion. Dhiraj Patar's thesis titled, *Morigaon Jilar Utsav Anusthan: Ek Samikshatmak Adhyayan*,⁸¹ examines the popular festivals celebrated in Morigaon district from a historical context, including the festivals observed by various ethnic communities in Mayong. Another work on festivals is the dissertation by Dibyajyoti Nath titled, *Morigaon Jilar Loka Utshab- Mela*⁸² which discusses the *melas* observed in different areas of the Morigaon district. It reiterates the fact that festivals are an integral part of the culture of any ethnic group which plays a crucial role in social integration. Nath's work also has much information on aspects of the history of other petty kingdoms of central Assam.

III. Literature on Theoretical Framework

The British Anthropologist E.B. Tylor⁸³ regarded as founder of cultural anthropology provides one of the earliest and widely accepted definition of culture in his seminal work titled *Primitive Culture*, which is as thus: "...that

⁸⁰ Minakshi Tamuli, *Mayangar Loka Sahitya: Mantra Sahityar Bishesh Adhyaayan*, (Unpublished Ph.D. thesis), Department of Assamese, Gauhati University, Guwahati, 2014.

⁸¹ Dhiraj Patar, *Morigaon Jilar Utsav Anusthan: Ek Samikshatmak Adhyayan*, (Unpublished Ph.D. thesis), Department of Assamese, Gauhati University, Guwahati, 2013.

⁸² Dibyajyoti Nath, *Morigaon Jilar Loka Utshab - Mela*, (Unpublished M. Phil. Dissertation), Department of Modern Indian Language, Gauhati University, Guwahati, Assam, 2006.

⁸³ E.B. Tylor, *Primitive Culture*, Gordon Press, New York, 1974 (Reprint).

complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.”⁸⁴ Culture⁸⁵ is a multidimensional phenomenon; a way of life, a complex whole which encompasses concerns of historical consciousness, folklore and legends, mythology, dance and rituals, language etc, shared by a group of people. Sociologists and anthropologists use ‘culture’⁸⁶ as a collective noun for the symbolic and learned, non-biological aspects of human society, including language, custom and convention, by which human behaviour can be distinguished from that of other primates. All cultures change through time; and cultures do not exist in isolation. There are dynamic processes operating that encourage the acceptance of new things and ideas while there are others that encourage changeless stability. *Anthropology: Race, Language, Culture, Psychology, Prehistory* by A.L. Kroeber⁸⁷ explains how diffusion and the process of acculturation are necessarily inter-related to each other.

Within the system used by folklorists, the major categories of traditional narratives include myths and legends. Although history and mythology are apparently removed from each other, both share the burden of the past. It must be admitted that there are historical inaccuracies in chronological consistency and cohesion in folklore materials. Further, evaluating and interpreting the symbols in myths will have to keep in mind the problem of understanding it in their specific historical conditions. It is important to note that the spectrums of myths are not

⁸⁴ Gary Ferraro and Susan Andreatta, *Cultural Anthropology: An Applied Perspective*, Wadsworth Thompson Learning, Belmont, 2012, p. 28.

⁸⁵ Ian Buchanan, *A Dictionary of Critical Theory*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2010, p. 105.

⁸⁶ A. Nicholhas *et al.*, *The Penguin Dictionary of Sociology*, Penguin, United Kingdom, 1984, p. 59.

⁸⁷ Kroeber, A.L., *Anthropology: Race, Language, Culture, Psychology, Prehistory*, Harcourt, Brace and World Inc., New York, 1948.

to be taken literally; rather it involves the study of its text, texture and context. Romila Thapar's⁸⁸ book titled, *Ancient Indian Social History: Some Interpretations* examines myths and opines that it is crucial to understand why they were created at certain periods of time, who generated or invented them, what was the motivation and how the myths came to be transformed into collective beliefs. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger in the book titled, *The Invention of Tradition*⁸⁹ explains that invention of tradition may take place consciously or unconsciously when a community faces identity crisis - an alien culture imposing on the indigenous-necessitating construction of one's identity. The assimilation of various traditions may not be coherent; and the corresponding reconstruction will therefore have to be carefully examined. The influence of Brahmanical faith and its implications for Mayong society will be analysed within this framework.

There are some valuable articles published in the *Journal of the Assam Research Society* published by the Kamarupa Anusandhana Samiti which are in the form of archaeological surveys and reports. The *Proceedings of the North East India History Association* also contains region-specific papers and these have been consulted for this research work. The other journals made use of for this study include *The Indian Historical Review*, *Journal of Asiatic Society, Kolkata* and *The NEHU Journal*. The research has also consulted the *Encyclopaedia of Religion*,⁹⁰

⁸⁸ Romila Thapar, *Ancient Indian Social History: Some Interpretations*, Orient Blackswan Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi, 2015, pp. 260, 263.

⁸⁹ Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (ed.), *op.cit.*

⁹⁰ Mircea Elaide (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of Religion*, Vol. 12, Macmillan Publishing Company, New York, 1987.

and *Ritual Studies: Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Religion*⁹¹ which have helped in the wider understanding and analysis of magic and religion, and ritual practices.

Some of the research papers published in vernacular in journals, souvenirs and proceedings of seminars which have been consulted include: Assam Sahitya Sabha publications, *Pragati*: the annual Magazine of Mayong Anchalik College,⁹² *Tantram*: Souvenir of Mayang Anchalik College,⁹³ *Suruji*: the annual magazine of Mayong Higher Secondary school etc.

The history of Mayong has attracted much attention but negligible research. Attempts have been made in the past to study aspects of the history and culture of the erstwhile kingdom but as yet there is no comprehensive book dealing with its history and culture. One of the reasons could be the difficulty of getting access to the sources which are mainly in the form of folk tradition. The present research work attempts to fill this lacuna.

RATIONALE OF STUDY:

The culture of Mayong is steeped in magical charms with widespread use of *mantras* for traditional healing practices and sorcery. The ritual specialists who practice the art of healing called *Bez* are believed to possess supernatural powers. The available literature known as *mantraputhis* bear the evidence of its use in the past. Mayong is rich in archaeological sources as revealed by various relics discovered by *The Archaeological Survey of India*, Guwahati. The Mayong Rural Museum and Research Centre has also preserved artifacts such as swords, sharp

⁹¹ *Ritual Studies: Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Religion*; oxfordre.com>religion>view>acrefore; Accessed on 12/01/2018.

⁹² L.G. Nath and Dhanya Ram Roy (eds.), *Pragati*, Annual Magazine of Mayang Anchalik College, Mayang Anchalik College, Rajamayong, Morigaon, Assam, 2013-2014.

⁹³ Utpal Nath (ed.), *Tantram*, A Souvenir of the Silver Jubilee Year Celebration of Mayong Anchalik College, 11-13 August, Silver Jubilee Celebration Committee, Mayong, Morigaon, 2017.

weapons and pots that are believed to have been used in black magic rituals. The discovery of Hara-Gauri images indicates the prevalence of Tantricism in Mayong history. The Burhamayong Rock Inscription is yet to be deciphered completely although there are indications that it belonged to 1700 CE. The sculptural images of gods such as Ganesa reveal the worship of Brahmanical deities. The erstwhile kingdom of Mayong existed with many other petty kingdoms during the medieval period of Assam and it maintained relations with the Ahoms. Mayong exemplifies a place rich in traditional folk belief system although it came to be influenced by institutionalised religions such as Saivism, Saktism, and Neo-Vaisnavism propagated by Sankaradeva and his followers in Assam. It is, therefore, a fertile ground to explore aspects of continuity and change of its history and culture, particularly against the background of it having existed as a kingdom in the past, the socio-economic developments as a Gaon Panchayat, and the cross-cultural interactions in different periods of Assam history.

OBJECTIVES:

The research study aims:

- *To document* the history of Mayong.
- *To gain insights* into magical lore, *mantras* and rituals to reconstruct Mayong's history and culture.
- *To examine* the implications of the religious beliefs and practices in contemporary society.

PERIOD OF STUDY:

The research covers the period from the 16th century CE to the contemporary period. According to Mayong *Vamsawali* dated in the 16th century CE, it is recorded that one Dimasa Kachari prince by the name of Suinat Singha had started the rule in Mayong. This year of accession to the throne is a significant reference for documenting the history of the erstwhile kingdom. Mayong has continued to preserve the monarchical system in a symbolic way. In the year 2005 CE, the coronation ceremony of the present titular king Taranikanta Singha was organised by performing the necessary rituals. It may be noted that the *raja* is the custodian of the royal *Vamsawali*, a very important source for the study.

UNIVERSE OF STUDY:

The Universe of study is Mayong situated in the Morigaon district of Assam, about 40 kms from the city of Guwahati and in a distance of 45 kms from Morigaon district headquarters. The focus of research will be the Mayong Gaon Panchayat which roughly corresponds to the territorial domain of the erstwhile kingdom. The neighbouring areas which fall within the boundary of the present Mayong Revenue Circle and Mayong Development Block will be examined to the extent necessary to reconstruct the history of Mayong. It may be noted that majority of the *mantraputhi* manuscripts have been discovered from Mayong Gaon Panchayat, which comprises of nineteen villages.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS:

The study starts with the hypothesis that each society has its own set of beliefs and practices. Though, there are certain similarities among different traditions in the world but in reality, each of them are distinct from each other. Therefore, each belief system should be studied by paying due attention to its own peculiarities and contexts. Culture is always dynamic, not static, but the pace of change may vary time to time depending upon certain forces in the contemporary society.

Some research questions to be tested are:

- What is the impact of *mantras* upon the socio - economic condition of the people?
- What changes, if any, have taken place in Mayong society with the introduction of institutionalised religions such as Saivism and Vaisnavism?
- What are the gender implications in the context of magic and sorcery as practiced in Mayong?

DATA AND METHODOLOGY:

The research follows an analytical method of investigation within the framework of historical methodology. The historical method comprises the techniques and guidelines which makes use of primary sources and other evidence, such as secondary sources which are examined and critically analysed to write history. This study also makes use of sociological and anthropological approaches to understand the subject from a wider perspective.

Both primary and secondary sources are being used for this study. The primary sources include relevant materials such as *Census of India*, documents collected from the Office of the Mayong Revenue Circle, Journals and *Buranjis* etc. The *mantraputhis* or manuscripts on *mantras* preserved in the Mayong Village Museum and Research Centre and also in custody of individuals form an important primary source for the study. The archaeological evidence in Mayong which are also used as sources include inscriptions, sculptures, and sites of religious importance scattered in the villages under the Mayong Gaon Panchayat. Besides, there are some unpublished research works which deal with Mayong culture and this has been consulted for this study. The secondary sources include articles published in magazines and souvenirs, books, newspapers etc. which focus on Mayong as a centre of magic. E-resources such as e-books have also been consulted.

The research work is also based on an extensive field work conducted through questionnaires and interviews of a cross-section of the community residing in Mayong and neighbouring areas in Morigaon district, and also other districts in Assam.⁹⁴

CHAPTERIZATION:

The research study is organised into five chapters as follows:

Chapter I: Introduction

Statement of the Problem, Literature Review, Rationale of Study, Objectives, Period of Study, Universe of Study, Research Questions, Data and Methodology, and Chapterization.

⁹⁴ See Appendix V: List of Persons Interviewed in Morigaon District, Assam; List of Persons Interviewed in Other Districts & outside Mayong; Appendix VI: Sample of Questionnaire.

Chapter II: Mayong in Myth and History

Origin, Migration and Settlement; Political History through Ancient, Medieval and Modern periods of Assam history.

Chapter III: Mayong Culture: Society and Economy

Social Composition, Customs and Traditional Practices, Social Organisation, Religion, Economy, Cross-cultural Interactions, Women.

Chapter IV: Rituals and Ritual Specialists

Traditional Knowledge and Rituals, *Bez* and *Kabiraj* as Folk Healers, *mantra* and magic; Implications for contemporary society.

Chapter V: Conclusion

Major Findings.